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Article full title

Implementing the employability agenda: a critical review of curriculum developments in Political Science and International Relations in English universities

Article short title

The Employability Agenda in Politics/IR

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Employability, curricular issues, pedagogy, political studies, international relations.

Abstract

This paper draws on research commissioned by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and conducted during 2013. It interrogates the ways in which the employability agenda has been fed through to the level of individual politics departments. The project was particularly concerned with establishing whether, and how, colleagues in politics and international relations (IR) had taken ownership of student employability at the level of the curriculum. In this paper, we summarise the key findings, and expand further on the (sometimes troubling) professional implications of infusing concern for graduate outcomes within a pedagogic framework that emphasises critical engagement with the underpinning political structures of the labour market.

Introduction

With some of the lowest levels of graduate employability across university campuses, and the non-vocational nature of most Politics/International Relations (IR) undergraduate programmes, the discipline faces a huge challenge in responding to the increasingly prevalent employability agenda in higher education. Indeed, as Politics/IR students feel the burden of the £9000 annual student fee now charged by most universities,¹ and an ever-more contracting (see Table 1) and competitive graduate jobs market, unpicking the existing employability training and learning in the Politics/IR curriculum in universities has never been so essential. This paper builds on research conducted for the Higher Education Academy (HEA), exploring the employability learning provision in a cross-section of English higher education institutions (HEIs) with a view to identifying examples of good practice in order to generate reflection on how best the discipline can respond to the employability agenda. The original project (The Authors, 2014) maps how employability is ingrained in various Politics/IR departments'² curricula; here we focus on the implications for disciplinary politics and for teaching practice, to provide an insight into the scale of the practical and pedagogic challenges we face as a discipline. While our focus here is on Political Science/IR many of the challenges we highlight are not specific problems for the discipline and will be shared by other, apparently non-vocational, disciplines.

Table 1 about here

The Employability Agenda in Higher Education

Employability is a familiar discourse in higher education, which owes much to earlier terms such as 'core skills', 'key skills', 'transferable skills' and 'generic skills' (for a critical review of the concept of employability see Arora, 2013; Ashe, 2012). Employability skills are conceptualised as a set of largely practical and behavioural graduate attributes, with academics under compulsion to find ways of embedding skills learning and careers-orientated teaching into the curriculum: by using work experience and placement schemes, developing teaching methods to build team-working skills, creating more diverse assessment regimes to develop broader communication skills, and using methods to advance situated and reflective learning (Anderson et al., 2006, Hager and Holland, 2006, Harvey and Knight, 2003, Knight and Yorke, 2004, Knight et al., 2003, Macfarlane-Dick et al., 2006). The genesis of the skills agenda can be traced to the 1997 Dearing Report (National Committee of Enquiry Into Higher Education, 1997), which led to the introduction of codes of practice in curriculum development and required programme specifications to identify specific learning outcomes in the 'core skills' of communication, numeracy, information technology, and reflective learning. The 2006 Leitch Review of Skills was the first hint of a more focused attention on employability. Leitch identified the need to develop what he called 'high skills' in graduates to 'enable businesses to compete in the global economy' (Leitch, 2006, p.21, see also Moore, 2010, pp. 48-70). The then government minister, John Denham, welcomed the Report's recommendations, arguing that United Kingdom (UK) graduates 'feel less prepared for their jobs after graduation' and that 'we simply do not have enough people with high-level skills in the workplace' (Denham, 2008). Higher Ambitions (BIS,

¹ The average fee across English and Welsh universities for the 2012-13 academic session was £8,389 with over half of all students studying programmes that charge a £9000 annual tuition fee (UCAS, 2012)

² We use the term department throughout while recognising that in many HEIs have Schools of Politics/IR or units that exist in purely administrative terms within wider faculties.

2010), the Labour government's Higher Education Framework document, went on to set out a number of recommendations for increased business – university engagement to address the perceived low attainment of employability skills among UK graduates. These UK initiatives were reinforced by employability initiatives in the Bologna Process-European Higher Education Area launched in 2007 (EHEA, 2007), as well as skills initiatives such as 'New Skills for New Jobs' instigated by the European Commission in 2008 (European Commission, 2008). Both of these European developments have propelled issues of skills training to the forefront of curriculum developments in the member state universities, encouraging closer cooperation between business and universities in curriculum development as the key strategy for enhancing graduate employability across the European Union (Maurer and Mawdsley, 2014). Although our research is focused on English universities' response to policy initiatives developed by Westminster, it is important to note that these European level programmes have led to the prioritisation of employability in universities throughout the UK (see Universities-Scotland, 2013; Higher Education Wales, 2012; DELNI, 2012)

The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government have continued the focus on employability in higher education by first requiring universities to publish 'Employability Statements' outlining their strategies for delivering highly-skilled graduates (HEFCE, 2010). Then, from September 2012, the government has required UK universities to publish Key Information Sets (KIS) on each of their undergraduate programmes giving details, among a long list of other things, of graduate employability rates, average graduate earnings, and common job types attained six months after graduation. Notwithstanding issues about the reliability of such data and its usefulness to students (Dill and Soo, 2004) as well as the drawbacks of a six month data check point on employability which seems too early given the life span of a graduate (Nystrom et al., 2008), the dissemination of this employability performance data is designed to help prospective applicants make more informed choices about programmes of study and universities by making universities more accountable for their graduates.

Forcing universities to publish data on employment rates of graduates highlights the extent to which the employability agenda in higher education is focused on the end result of job realisation.³ As such, the HEI employability agenda seems to be rather less concerned with developing employable graduates as it is with employed graduates. In an increasingly constricted jobs market this is not a comfortable position for higher education to find itself in, since many graduates will be unemployed or underemployed through no fault of their own. Furthermore, Politics and IR in particular finds itself in a precarious position to weather an increased focus on graduate employment. According to the KIS data, Politics/IR graduates are far less likely to attain graduate employment than many of their peers in other disciplines; this is especially (but not exclusively) the case for those who have graduated with Politics/IR degrees from non-Russell Group universities. Less than half of Politics/IR graduates from De Montfort University, University of Salford, Manchester Metropolitan University, Nottingham Trent University, and Sheffield Hallam University, for example, were in graduate employment six months after graduating. Overall in the Russell Group of universities – where factors such as 'university reputation' clearly provide some competitive advantage to students entering the graduate labour market – around a third of Politics/IR graduates are not in graduate employment six months after graduation (see www.unistats.direct.gov.uk). In a potentially not unconnected trend, UCAS data shows a 4,148 drop (11.5%) in the number of applications for Politics degree programme in the 2012 cycle from the previous year, which is higher than the 6.6% fall in total applications between 2011 and 2012. The 2012 figure also fell by 1,215 (3.5%) from the 2010 cycle – again a higher than average drop in the number of applications.⁴

³ This is a very narrow approach since employability is just as dependent upon factors such as gender, race, and social class as it is on skills (see McNabb et al., 2002; Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Morley 2001; Smith and Naylor, 2001).

⁴ We have included the data for 2010 because 2011 application figures are seen as atypical due to the introduction of higher student fee contribution in the 2012-13 academic year. UCAS applications data is available at <http://www.ucas.com/data-analysis>

Methodology and Approach

The methods used to map the dynamics of employability initiatives in Politics/IR departments of English HEIs included a web-based enquiry into university and departmental pages, and interviews with academic staff from a cross-section of universities. The former allowed us to analyse the public message departments wanted to narrate, primarily to potential students, whilst the latter offered an ‘insider’ view as to the types and effectiveness of employability initiatives offered. The web-based research worked to capture the students’ view of different departments’ employability initiatives (for a comparable method of pedagogical mapping see Foster et al., 2012), and consisted of reviewing both school/departmental webpages and universities’ career websites to consider how university careers services are marketed, and to which stakeholder groups. In order to create a more robust dataset we complemented the web-based research with a number of in-depth semi-structured interviews with key academic staff working on employability within the same departments. These interviews were largely conducted over the phone, although due to time constraints or interviewee preference, a couple of the interviews were undertaken via email or conducted face-to-face. The telephone interviews tended to be about 20-30 minutes long and were partially structured using six open-ended questions on their experience of employability initiatives, and whether they were curricular or non-curricular in nature. The web-based data discusses HEIs by name since all the material we use is in the public domain. The interview data, however, refers only to the classification of the HEI as either ‘elite’ or ‘new’ for comparative purposes (and sometimes to ‘pre’ and ‘post’-1992 where this appeared to generate significant divisions). This is to uphold the anonymity of the participants in line with research ethics guidance.

The selected universities (see Table 2) were drawn from a range of English HEIs belonging to a variety of university groupings; namely, post 1992, University Alliance, 1994, and Russell Group. The intention was to provide a broad and meaningful cross section of university groupings - each of which have variable agendas with regards to employability that, in some cases, links to the character of their student cohorts on intake and the university’s contacts with potential employers. The different characters of ‘elite’ and ‘new’ universities in relation to learning expectations, diversity of students, entry requirements and employer contact impacted upon our sample selection. Indeed, it has been established that ‘elite’ HEIs, typified by Russell Group universities, require students to enter with higher A-Level (or equivalent) grades (Brennan et al., 2009). In addition, employers target ‘elite’ HEIs more frequently than ‘new’ HEIs due to the assumption that the best students reside in ‘elite’ institutions. That the likelihood of a graduate from Oxbridge⁵ being accepted on a ‘fast-track’ graduate career scheme is 8:1, whilst for a ‘new’ university graduate it is 235:1 ((Brown, 2007, p. 36)). Our sample was therefore driven by previous work, which has established the (employability) advantages that have been implicitly and explicitly linked to ‘elite’ institutions such as Russell Group universities.

Table 2 about here

FINDINGS: WEBSITE DATA

Most universities followed similar formats, with a page for each degree holding a ‘fact file’ for the programme, separated by tabs listing relevant concerns (such as careers, modules, and fees). This was

⁵ This study excluded Oxbridge as it is seen as an outlier in relation to graduate employment.

sometimes located on a central university hub, and sometimes delegated to the departmental level or shared between the two. In terms of the presentation of employability, several particular points of interest were identified: namely the framing of references to graduate employment or marketable skills, the use of quantitative data such as KIS metrics, and the presence of competitive differentiation in discourse (see Table 3 for a summary). Discourses across the categories were quite varied. Several universities put employability front and centre, some did not explicitly raise the word 'employability' whilst still discussing component aspects, and some did not mention it at all. Where employability was prioritised, some notable particulars of focus were graduate employment rates, the skills afforded to students, previous employment options and postgraduate study. In order to differentiate themselves, a number of strategies were used. Some universities, for example, clearly regarded having a good careers service (Manchester) or good links to Parliament and other formal institutions (Liverpool, Hull) as a competitive strength in attracting prospective students. However, some mentioned employability and employment sparingly or not at all. The most extreme manifestation of this comes from LSE, whose reference to employment is entirely minimal, despite having some of the most impressive employment rates in the sample (90% in employment or training with an average salary of £24,000).

Table 3 about here

Avoiding discussion of employability was, however, not apparent across the Russell Group as a whole. Elite universities were the most likely to discuss employability, with mid-century Robbins report-era universities the least likely to refer directly to employability (20%), compared to 72% of Russell Group universities and 56% of new universities. Indeed, when the latter two categories are combined (as they are throughout the rest of the analysis), a differentiation between the two categories is clear (72% versus 43%). This may seem counter-intuitive given the tendency of interviewees from new universities to stress the importance of employability. However, there is an obvious explanation: 'Elite' Universities were much more likely to have several webpages relating to their degrees, hosted at the departmental and central levels, giving more space to discuss different facets of the degree. This is quite significant for the rhetoric employed, as it allows 'Elite' departments to concentrate on marketing themselves by discussing the academic content of their degrees, leaving central services to discuss the less refined issues of money and jobs. This trend may be exaggerated by the fact that departments at 'New' universities were often bundled together in mixed staff groups, making it more difficult for them to assert a distinct intellectual identity.

Indeed, the research shows that the two categories of university engaged in subtle linguistic differentiation when referring to employability in their public presentation, with 'Elite' universities tending to emphasise the high regard their degrees are held in by employers, whereas 'new' universities were more likely to emphasise the means through which employability was embedded in the curriculum, often via work experience or module-based learning. A good example of this differentiation is provided by the two Sheffield Universities. The Department of Politics, University of Sheffield state that their politics degree is a 'subject that will stretch you academically, show you the world in a new light, and give you transferable skills that'll appeal to a whole range of employers...Whatever career path you follow, a good degree from us will pack a punch in the jobs market.' Conversely, the Department of Psychology, Sociology and Politics at Sheffield Hallam state that 'our courses are focused on employability, applying theoretical learning to the real world. We'll make sure you gain the skills employers want, like problem-solving, and how to handle and analyse data.' The assumption on the part of 'Elite' universities appears to be that they need merely to signal the intellectual prestige of their offerings. Indeed, this is reflected in the KIS data, which suggests on average greater numbers of students going on to the more favoured options of professional jobs and postgraduate study. Differentiation was equally evident at the central services level, which can be seen in the names attributed to careers services. Eight of the universities have 'employability' centres, three have 'employment' in the title, and there is an interesting split according to university type. 'Employment' was

only used by the post-1992s, and ‘careers services’ were far more prevalent amongst the Russell Group. Newer universities tended to engage with multiple supportive discourses, such as employment, development, guidance, and advice. The types of signals these send to employers, staff, and students were of course beyond the scope of this research (given that interviews were conducted with only one of these groups) but the congregation of particular discourses within particular types of universities certainly suggests that they are trying to gain a competitive advantage via the language used.

Table 4 about here

FINDINGS: INTERVIEW DATA

Table 5 sets out the results of our interviews. Our data is organised along three themes that examine developments in the programme (theme 1), pedagogic developments (theme 2), and lack of employability response (theme 3). As this highlights, some form of explicit employability module provision and credit bearing employability training is being offered by most of the Politics/IR departments involved in our interview survey. However, the interview responses from both ‘elite’ and ‘new’ institutions suggested that these tend to be related to specific modules and/or placements. The main difference between ‘new’ and ‘elite’ institutions seems to be that the latter tended to relate placements to formal ‘arena’ politics – particularly parliamentary and MP related placements, whilst the former tended towards a wider understanding of the job market for students of Politics/IR – particularly noting the charitable/volunteering sector and public sector. From this sample, it appears that ‘elite’ institutions favour placements in areas of formal politics, whilst, with the exception of one university, ‘new’ HEIs tend towards a more diverse range of careers suitable for students of this discipline. This may reflect the HEIs’ assumptions as to the likely career paths for their students, or their aspirations in relation to what they hope their graduates will do after leaving university. In addition to standard placements and associated modules, one respondent from an elite HEI noted the importance of the year abroad as informing the dissertation (which is credit bearing). Modules associated with placements, the year abroad as informing dissertation research, or credit bearing placements themselves can be classed as ‘experience based’ employability learning – offering students experience to enhance their CVs to, consequently, become more attractive to employers. Conversely, 3 of the 9⁶ ‘new’ universities’ Politics/IR departments offer ‘stand-alone’ modules on work and employment that reflect a more critical attitude to the workplace and organisations. Potentially, these modules offer a more ‘empowerment based’ version of employability learning – whereby students are taught (on credit bearing optional modules) about institutional cultures and the place of organisations within the national or international context, offering the skills to negotiate highly politicised environments.

Table 5 about here

All respondents noted tacit skills developed by students throughout their programme. These included ‘presentation skills’, ‘communication skills’, ‘team work’, and ‘critical thought’. In addition, one of the ‘elite’ HEIs noted their assessment regimes for some modules include ‘policy briefings’ which is an assessment directly linked to future employability. In addition 4 of the 9 respondents from ‘new’ HEIs highlighted their

⁶ 15 staff were interviewed, whilst 25 universities were included in the website survey. The discrepancy arose when we were unable to gain an interview contact in some of the universities, either because our contact did not generate a response, or because the departments were not in a position to supply data.

use of non-traditional assessments as key to employability training within the curriculum, highlighting simulation exercises, poster presentations, exhibitions and report writing. As such, comparatively, it seems there is a great deal of emphasis on assessment as demonstrative of employability learning, with 'new' universities offering greater diversity in the assessments they provide. This again could reflect the aspirations of departments with regards to their students' future employment whereby 'elite' institutions conflate more traditional assessments with mainstream 'political' professions and 'new' universities see their future alumni within a variety of different professional fields. In other words, 'new' universities may be responding to the fact that their graduates are disadvantaged in the job market in comparison to 'elite' university graduates. Table 6 highlights the employability initiatives developed outside of the curriculum, again organised around three themes depending on the agents driving the initiative; academic staff (theme 1), students (themes 2), or central support staff/careers services (theme 3).

Table 6 about here

In relation to theme 1, it appears that academics from various departments provide a range of employability activities designed for their particular student cohorts. Three of the 'elite' HEI respondents highlighted that some academic staff utilised their contact with alumni and other professionals to organise talks for students. Moreover, another 'elite' HEI respondent highlighted that staff used their contacts to set up placements for students. From the 'new' universities, two respondents noted that they themselves facilitated a placement scheme for students (assisting them to locate and apply for placements) and another noted that staff organised talks for students using their own contacts. While recent research reveals that around a third of departments include some sort of placement in their Politics/IR programmes to enhance employability learning and skills (Curtis, 2012: 153), our research finds that, overall, it appears that staff must rely on their own networks to provide employability opportunities for students and that the institutional support for these initiatives is weak. Some respondents suggested that the amount of effort put into such schemes is not recompensed by either student take-up (as these events tend to have a low student attendance) or institutional recognition. In addition to this, two 'new' universities offer schemes for students to engage in research projects being undertaken by academic staff members. One of the respondents noted that this scheme runs through a university system whereby staff members apply to the university for money to order to pay students to undertake research. This particular scheme offers students both 'skills based' and 'experience-based' employability learning, but significant time and effort is required from individual staff members for this initiative to materialise. There were also some particularly noteworthy responses to theme two (on student involvement), with a quarter of the 'elite' HEI respondents noting student-led employability initiatives, both in relation to events organised by their respective student societies or by individual students themselves. However, only one of the 'new' HEI respondents noted this student 'self-organisation'. This therefore represents a clear distinction.

The interviews suggest that much of the non-curriculum employability activities are delivered at school/faculty or university level (theme 3), with 14 out of 15 respondents noting these centrally organised services. Indeed, the three most common central initiatives offered to students were various forms of 'skills award' offered by universities (where students receive a certificate to show they have achieved various skill-sets), student personal development planning (PDP) tools (where students record and reflect upon their skills development – but note this process is usually designed around departmental level personal and academic tutoring), and support with writing CVs, filling application forms and practice interviews, also offered by centralised careers service staff. The skills award approach relates quite obviously to a 'skills-based' form of employability learning, whilst PDPs, CV support and so on could be considered to be more of an 'empowerment-based' form of employability learning, as it is related to assisting students in developing reflective skills and tools to negotiate with employers via the application process. However, each of these forms of employability learning are rarely tailored to the Politics/IR graduate and more often

than not relate to generic skill sets and advice, with the exception of two HEIs (one elite and one new) who detailed departmental careers advisors, and one further 'new' HEI in which there is a module designed for honing these employability skills in relation to politics specifically.

Table 7 about here

Although patchy it appears 'new' universities have, by and large, formally integrated placement schemes as part of their degree programmes. Indeed, some of these placement schemes are combined with year/semester abroad opportunities where students participate in internships internationally (this was emphasised by two 'new' university respondents). 'Elite' HEIs appear to be behind in establishing placement schemes, with only one of the six interviewees emphasising an established and integrated House of Commons parliamentary placement module (which appears to be open only to students who have undertaken a very specific programme of study). Indeed, this data is indicative of the wider jobs market and we would argue that 'elite' institutions, rather than replicating the best practice already established by 'new' institutions in relation to placements, are instead responding to the restricted jobs market more generally. In other words, 'elite' institutions are realising that it is becoming more difficult for their students to get jobs and may therefore be starting to recognise the added benefits placements make to employability. However, when we consider student uptake for these placements opportunities, this appears to be low across institutions, unless the placement is a compulsory part of a degree programme.

In relation to the year abroad initiative, most institutions ('new' and 'elite') are signed up to ERASMUS or related schemes. With the exception of one 'elite' and one 'new' HEI, it appears that international opportunities are not particularly popular amongst students, despite their availability. Another issue, which three of the respondents noted, was that more students come in than go out, indicating a lack of mobility amongst English HEI students. There are a number of reasons recounted for the reluctance of Politics/IR students to travel abroad for study or placement opportunities. These range from language barriers, losing touch with one's cohort, care duties, and financial constraints. This means the most mobile students are likely to be financially secure, bi-lingual or multi-lingual, have no obvious care obligations and on degree programmes where the year abroad has a high uptake already (so they remain with their cohort). As such, it is unsurprising that an 'elite' HEI, with a less diverse and wealthier cohort, reported a high uptake in relation to the year abroad opportunities. Consequently, it was surprising that one new HEI also noted a fairly high uptake (20%), although the particular respondent went on to remark that the success of the year abroad was likely to be a result of this initiative being fully integrated into the programme of study, available for shorter time periods such as a single semester (and therefore not too disruptive to the students' experience) in addition to being well advertised and convened by a dedicated and committed member of staff. Overall, year abroad and placements schemes relate to 'experience-based' employability learning and it appears many institutions are trying to promote these schemes and that student demand for these schemes is increasing. However, it is important to note that these schemes tend to be focussed on 'what employers want' as opposed to what can build student confidence (although the latter, in some cases, may be a by-product of the former).

Table 8 about here

All interviewees, in response to the question 'what employability skills do you believe your average graduate leaves university with?' provided a list of fairly consistent answers including communication, presentation, time/organisation management, and critical analytical skills. These skills appear embedded

implicitly within the curriculum and are largely related to business-led 'skills-based' employability learning as detailed in CBI reports (CBI, 2009; CBI/UUK, 2010). Only one of the HEI interview respondents linked this question explicitly to 'experience-based' employability learning, which is perhaps related to the fact that the uptake for placements and international initiatives is fairly low in most HEIs – and therefore not something that is commonly acquired by graduates from a Politics/IR department. In relation to 'empowerment-based' employability learning, two of the 'elite' HEIs noted 'life skills' and 'self-marketing' and three of the 'new' HEIs emphasised skills related to leadership and confidence. Another interesting aspect of these results when comparing 'elite' with 'new' HEIs was that the former, when relaying skills beyond the standard skill-set, tended to focus on research training, particularly in relation to quantitative methods. However, the skill-sets which 'new' universities tended to focus on related to competence in the use of digital technology, using social media, writing press releases and briefing papers. Indeed, these proficiencies tend to be more media focused and perhaps more attuned to qualitative, or even journalistic, research skills. In addition, it is demonstrative of the skills HEIs feel their students will need when they leave university, with 'elite' HEIs recognising quantitative and research skills to be of high importance (perhaps leading into the financial services, research careers or postgraduate education) and 'new' HEIs recognising new media and journalistic skills to be of high importance (perhaps leading into a range of administrative or creative careers). With 'new' HEIs it appears students are being prepared more for the world of work whilst, to some extent, 'elite' institutions are preparing their students for postgraduate education.

Table 9 about here

In relation to the final question, detailed in Table 9, a range of answers were given relating to placements and year abroad schemes (experience-based) and, to a lesser extent, skills development embedded within programmes (skills-based). Only two respondents, one from a 'new' and one from an 'elite' HEI, emphasised an empowerment-based response, which focussed on students building confidence and 'shaping' the world around them. Overall, what was surprising about the responses given to this question was that they seemed to conflict with the answers offered in relation to the previous question; namely 'what skills does your average graduate leave university with?' There is a disconnect between what many universities (both 'elite' and 'new') recognise as what 'they do best' and the skills they believe their graduates acquire. This may be due to the fact that 'experience-based' employability learning is more tangible as an initiative relating to best practice. Nonetheless, what is clear from this data is that Politics/IR departments in both 'new' and 'elite' HEIs, by and large, tend to recognise employability learning in line with a business led agenda (based on skills and experience) rather than as a way to empower students in their future workplaces.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PROFESSION

Superficially, it appears that Politics and IR is responding rather well to the employability agenda: respondents were almost universally in agreement that skills-based employability learning is ingrained (implicitly) in the Politics/IR curriculum. Yet, this touches upon a central paradox: if there is a feeling within the discipline that a Politics degree equips students well with valuable skills, why aren't students gaining employment? Our research suggests a dual-faceted answer to this conundrum. First there is a disconnect between the 'skills' agenda and broader notions of 'empowerment' or 'experience' based employability learning, that may better provide students with the cognitive capacity to navigate their own careers, whilst sitting more easily within the critical stance of many social science degree programmes. Second, there are

frequently practical disjunctures between central and departmental co-ordination of employability initiatives, such that neither staff nor students consistently see the value of employability training within an academic degree programme. Across both facets, our research highlighted strategic differentiation amongst universities positioned in different corners of the market. 'Newer' universities tended to be more centralised in their provision of employability initiatives, but as a result, more proactive in providing well-organised and well-resourced experience and empowerment based employability learning opportunities. By contrast, 'elite' universities were more likely to delegate employability to the departmental level, which offered these departments more freedom – but in practice this tended to have the result of placing heavy burdens on the professional contacts and energy of individual staff members. Thus, a further paradox arises: the best performing departments tended to have a great deal of autonomy to engage in novel initiatives and to work training into the curriculum, but in order for this to be successful, it needs a great deal of central support in the form of resources and administration. In the current climate, this entails that departments are often trapped into provision that does not engage students or staff.

Whilst a lack of engagement with the employability agenda would seem to pose problems within any discipline, it is a particular problem in the social sciences, where critical engagement with the forces that shape the social world are a unifying theme of the degree programme. It is therefore unsurprising that many participants, despite celebrating the efforts made by departments to improve outcomes for their undergraduates (and showing real pride in the achievements of their students), expressed concern with what they saw as the neoliberal agenda underpinning the expression of employability within higher education. Indeed, many respondents situated this concern within a broader reflection on the status of the profession, and its relationship to its object. Politics/IR is a non-vocational discipline, even though many students do these degrees because they want political careers (or associated careers, such as research or analysis). But as the KIS data on departmental websites demonstrates, most will not become MPs, or find themselves in associated careers (indeed, most do not even secure graduate-level careers, at least initially). Moreover, students struggle to relate the content of their degrees to more ephemeral ideas of employability (Ashe, 2012). This feeds in to a sense of unease amongst some staff that students may have quite unrealistic expectations about what careers a Politics/IR degree will equip them for, and questioning of what responsibility individual academics can bring to bear in helping students to shape their own career paths within a constricting market where opportunities are certainly not equal for all graduates (McNabb et al., 2002; Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Morley 2001; Smith and Naylor, 2001).

CONCLUSION

Central careers services in English HEIs continue to be primarily responsible for the delivery of employability skills training and learning to students whether this be through on-campus workshops or through on-line PDP tools. They remain the frontline service in response to the employability agenda, offering students opportunities to develop skills, guidance and information on careers and employment prospects, and empowering students to develop tools to negotiate their employment through CV building and interview preparation and training. But with the widespread publication of employability data for each and every degree programme in all HEIs, departments have become increasingly aware of the need (or are being compelled by their university) to find ways of responding to the agenda at discipline level. In sum, the increasing attention to employability in higher education has meant that those who teach Politics/IR in the university sector have had to find ways of instilling the generic capabilities that business has made clear they require of graduates.

Our data indicates that, for the most part, this response has taken the form of offering skills-based and experienced-based employability learning, especially in 'new' universities, often as an attempt to level the playing field for their students who otherwise are disadvantaged in the graduate job market due to socio-

economic factors. This dominant approach is based on staff being able to deliver career-orientated teaching methods and assessment regimes whereby students are offered opportunities to develop presentation skills, team working skills, and broader professional communication skills. Some universities also offer what we have termed 'empowerment-based' employability learning, where students are encouraged to learn how to shape their fates by managing their own careers and employment. There are clearly resource issues at play here; 'empowerment-based' provision is resource intensive, whether it is provided by central careers services offering CV guidance and interview practice sessions for students (which if most students wanted them, would be impossible to provide on a majority of campuses given the very large student numbers), or through student PDPs which rely on personal and academic tutoring systems (where, typically, an academic may have up to 30 – and in some cases more – students to work with on a 1:1 basis). Student engagement with the employability agenda is patchy and there appears to be tensions arising from what is clearly a business-led skills agenda. Even amongst students of a business school, engagement with the employability agenda borders on apathy (Tymon, 2013), and the comments of academic staff in this survey would suggest that the views of Politics/IR students are even more hostile – although this is an area where greater research would be valuable. Until this is addressed to incorporate the perspectives and needs of all stakeholder groups – staff, students and employers – the employability agenda in the Politics/IR curriculum will fail to meet the needs of many of our students.

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